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AUTHOR Reece, Shelley C.
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ABSTRACT

One way to improve composition skills and to raise the level of interest in composition is by incorporating language philosophy into the composition process. That is, a teacher might use language games as a way of teaching writing. Such games include giving orders, describing an object, reporting an event, telling a joke, asking, thanking, cursing, or praying. A student might be asked to choose a language game and then describe it using analogies, asking questions, and using analytical techniques. This process will encourage students to develop their powers of reasoning and organization. (TJ)

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Shelley C. Reece
Portland State University

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Ordinary Language Philosophy and Composition

I want to make some modest claims for using ordinary language philosophy as a way of working with students and a way for students to work through papers in or out of a composition course. I make these modest claims tentatively because I'm not trained in philosophy, but I still want to take this risk because of what I found when I read John Wilson's Thinking with Concepts, O. K. Bouwsma's Philosophical Essays, Gilbert Ryle's Dilemmas, and when I worked and re-worked with Ludwig Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations. What you will surely recognize as I proceed is that I won't be using formal proofs, offering categorical arguments, or proposing theories, but I hope you'll listen to me anyway. What I'm about to say will probably be easy to misunderstand but it won't be incoherent.

As I try to make sense here, I anticipate that you may have two questions: what is ordinary language philosophy?" and "what can it do, especially what can it do in a composition course?" The first of these questions is like asking me to name the chess pieces and the second like asking me to play the game. My advice is watch the game, what the players do, and you'll get the hang of it. If there's a definition to be had, there's where you'll find it.

Before I say anything about student writing, though, I want to look at ways we often proceed as composition teachers. We want our students to have practice in the uses of written language; along that line, we often want to give some all-purpose advice to help students work through their papers. In trying to be sensible, we may say something like "remember: think before you write." I have heard and seen that advice given numerous times, advice that does seem really sensible. But if we look at it for a moment, we might wonder what we've said. What do we think--thoughts? electro-chemical impulses? trace-elements? invisible words? When we give such advice, are we saying that writing is a medium for thought, that

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thoughts, like electrical impulses, are carried along lines of prose? These are puzzling questions about such seemingly simple advice. If you'll bear with me, I'd like to puzzle a bit more. Since the Trailblazers are big in Portland, let me look to basketball. It's as if coach Ramsey said to the team "think your way through the game, then play." Portland's opponents might be quite happy to have the Trailblazers using a set of stylized moves--passing the ball into an opponent's hands because they thought their own players would be there; thinking that the ball would go through the basket and shooting from mid-court; thinking that they had won the game and then losing it in the play. Is that something like saying think, then write? Let me take the analogy one more step. When basketball grows advanced enough, the players could sit together, think their way through the game, and not have to go out on the court at all; basketball could become a game of mental athletics.

Would we want to look back at language now and say language is a medium of thought? In this situation, once thought has developed enough, it would make spoken or written language unnecessary. We could use mental language, eliminating all those pesky spelling errors; all our talk about composition would lose its decibels and our writing its words. Yet basketball games without play and writing without words are puzzling, curious, and absurd situations.

Now surely we know more about writing than we do about thinking. We might replace "think before you write," our all-purpose advice, with descriptions of actual language activities, those activities Wittgenstein calls "language-games." They include

Giving orders and obeying them--

Describing the appearance of an object, or giving its measurements--

Reporting an event--

Speculating about an event--

Forming and testing a hypothesis--

Presenting the results of an experiment in tables and diagrams--

Making a story, and reading it--

Making a joke, and telling it--

Asking, thanking, cursing, greeting, praying. (PI #23)

When we stop giving general advice about thinking and start giving particular advice about writing, what can we say? What, in terms of ordinary language, will help our students find the know-how to work through their writings? I'd like to answer this second question with reference to the describing of language games, the using of analogies, the asking of questions, and the using of analytical techniques.

I might ask a student to pick a particular language game and describe it--say the student picked a joke. That student would need to feel no pressure, as Gilbert Ryle says, "to examine the logical behaviour of isolated concepts selected at random, perhaps, from a dictionary"(Dilemmas, p. 124). I didn't ask the student to define "description"; I didn't ask for a definition of the concept "joke"; I only asked for the student to describe how a joke works. The student would work from a particular case, what John Wilson calls a "model case." The student would probably tell the joke, then describe it.

Imagine, for a minute, that I'm the student.

I say to my friend, "D'you know how to keep a turkey in suspense?"

My friend says, "no. How?"

I say, "I'll tell you later."

This joke involves an unsuspecting friend, a trick question, and a shifting sense of word use. My friend needs to hear my question as the preparation for a piece of information; my question needs to sound as if "yes" or "no" will answer equally

well; and my use of the word turkey has to sound as if it's about a Thanksgiving bird and not an unsuspecting friend. Maybe the question also depends on knowing that turkeys are dumb birds, so something really special needs to be done to produce a predictable result. All of what I have said as the student, as briefly as I have put it, would describe the context and the language of the joke.

At this point, you may be wondering why anyone needs ordinary language philosophy to work as I have just suggested. I can only ask you to bear with me. Remember: I didn't say that these claims would be unusual, only that they would be easy to misunderstand. What value is there in having a student describe a language-game? There's value in having students work with something like "informal logic"; although I'm not describing what might be called "thinking straight," I do see a student reasoning from a particular case and describing the features of that case. I realize that there are problems with this way of proceeding, problems that Wittgenstein calls "our craving for generality" (Blue Book, p. 17). I also realize that a Monroe Beardsley or an Irving Copi might see hasty generalizations, jumping to conclusions, or inadequate samples. But I'm not asking for a student to work with a representative sample of a category; nor am I asking for conclusions about that category; nor, finally, am I requiring a student to generalize about the recurrent features of the concept "joke." I'm only asking for a student to begin with a model case of a language-game, possibly a joke, one which likely resembles other jokes; and I'm asking that student to describe that language-game. Nothing more. Besides reasoning from a particular case, a student may also create a conceptual pattern--an essay form, if you will--for the description of the joke. In other words, I do see at least two kinds of know-how coming from this sort of assignment--first, reasoning; second, organization.

Next, I might also ask a student to use analogies--that is, to write about one thing as if it were another. Often, we don't work enough with analogies, I believe,

possibly because, like Robert Frost said, all analogies break down sooner or later. To turn the coin over, analogies also hold up for a time, maybe long enough to serve our purposes for writing. For instance, what uses of language follow from seeing words as weapons? From seeing them as tools? What follows from seeing beauty in beautiful things as if it were alcohol in beer or wine? I don't know what follows, but I know where those questions may lead us: into investigations of language uses. It also seems that a kind of reasoning--can we call it reasoning by comparison?--is going on as we work through an analogy. Certainly, this kind of know-how is basic to revealing what we understand or misunderstand of language.

I have already been using analogies in my writing here--seeing a language-game as if it were chess or basketball. I worked earlier in this essay with a think-write--think-play analogy to heighten the oddness of some seemingly simple, common-sense advice we give our students. I wondered if such advice might be centered on a misunderstanding about language, let alone about thinking. Even though I was serious in making that analogy, there was pleasure in it too, possibly like the pleasure of a novelist or a poet in such play. I'm making a guess here, but I'd like to digress long enough to quote briefly from Muriel Spark's The Ballad of Peckham Rye, where she gives in to the pleasure of making analogies. Dougal Douglas, Ms. Spark's demonic hero, has come to a dance and partway through the evening, has got hold of a garbage can lid. Here's what Spark makes happen to it:

> Dougal sat on his haunches and banged a message out on a tom-tom. He sprang up and with the lid on his head was a Chinese coolie eating melancholy rice. He was an ardent cyclist, crouched over the handle-bars and pedalling uphill with the lid between his knees. He was an old

> woman with an umbrella; he stood on the upturned edges of the lid and speared fish from his rocking canoe; he was the man at the wheel of a racing car. . . (p. 67).

We could do worse than to give in to such pleasure, especially when our eyes and our students' are relentlessly focused on SKILL, or especially when our own faculty discussions about composition are not only without pleasure but are also grim and angry. We might give in to the pleasure of ulteriority for the moment, and our students may gain some know-how, by making analogies in writing.

Finally, I would like for students to ask questions rather than pick topics as a way of generating essays. Questions like "when was the Battle of Bosworth Field?" "how many sonnets did Shakespeare write?" or "what was the weight of Lord Byron's brain?" can be answered by the gathering and giving of information. Other questions like "how long should we allow our language to deteriorate?" or "should we permit Communism to overrun the free world?" can be answered by calling a thing good or bad. But neither kind of question is the kind I'm referring to here; I'm talking about what John Wilson calls questions of concept, questions like "is Ian Smith a racist?" "is writing thinking on paper?" or "are people who can write illiterate?" These questions, unlike the first two groups, can't be answered by gathering information or by making a value judgment. Instead, we might begin with another question: how are you talking about "racist," about "thinking on paper," about "illiterate?" In other words, each case is partly a case directly involving language use.

Several difficulties might arise here. Instead of asking a question, I might say to myself, "I have my answer, now what's my question?" That is, I might inquire only when I knew my inquiry would be successful, like the workers in a midwestern agricultural experiment station who proved, in order to be funded

again, that cattle eat grass and gain weight on it. It's as if I felt that I wouldn't learn anything from asking and analyzing the question, and that the only useful part of a question would be contained in its answer. Another difficulty might be that there is no pre-established essay form by which a person presents THE ANSWER. Possibly a comment from Wittgenstein's Investigations is useful here: "a philosophical problem has the form: I don't know my way about" (PI, #123). I think having a question I can't answer is like having a philosophical problem.

In working toward some kind of answer, our questions of a minute ago depend on the words "racist," "thinking on paper," and "illiterate." Such working may require model cases, but they alone won't be enough to present a family of uses. John Wilson's Thinking with Concepts is helpful here, for he helps us to reason from the particular by giving us some techniques of analysis-- "contrasting" and "borderline" as well as "model cases"--from which to work. What we find to say as we move toward an answer depends on the language of each case, but each kind of case prompts a different response. Someone else might say about a contrasting case, "that's certianly about a racist" or about a borderline case, "I wonder if that's about a racist." So these three kinds of cases may help us decide about Ian Smith, even though they won't define the meaning of the word "racist." They'll only give us some tools to help us carve out an area within which we can answer those questions. They're practical enough to help us lay out the form of an essay after we have asked a question of concept. Those are useful and essential skills for writers.

So far, I have only sketched out a few skills: description of a language game, uses of analogy, questions of concept, and techniques of analysis. They work not with students or teachers but with people. They can save us as writers by making us independent of our own marking pencils. And that's the most important language game of all.